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Langley tests defense systems

Experiments aim at improving targeting response

By R.W. Rogers

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LANGLEY AIR FORCE BASE - Langley Air Force Base is a key site in a \$60-million experiment to find the next generation of technology for air power. The outcome of that effort may determine if the United States remains the unchallenged superpower or slips in the new century.

During Joint Expeditionary Force Experiment 2000, Langley was the hub for rear support operations and tested systems which focused on allowing fighter pilots to more quickly find and destroy moving targets.

"It's a major technology tryout," said Brig. Gen. Donald J. Wetekam, director of the Air Combat Command's directorate of maintenance and logistics. "We haven't always made the right decisions in the past."

Wetekam said this year's experiment was "strongly influenced by Kosovo," where targeting information was often tardy in getting to the pilots.

Consequently, a major goal of the Air Force in this scenario is to "improve the kill chain" by reducing the time it takes for, say, an enemy to be spotted and then attacked. That time is now measured in several hours.

Air Combat Command Gen. John Jumper wants that time cut to 30 minutes and eventually to less than 10. He learned firsthand as commander of U.S. Forces in Europe during the Kosovo air campaign last year that no matter how smart your bombs are, you can't hit what you can't find.

Two of the systems tested at Langley were the Theater Battle Management Corps System and the Air Operation Decision Aid.

The former system coordinates air operations to allow more flexibility in hitting newly found targets. The latter automatically pairs targets and weapons systems, said Lt. Col. Bob Pannone, chief of the design branch of the Air Force Experimentation Office.

Air Force officials say their service and the U.S. military need an infusion of fresh technology to keep an edge on the battlefield. They say private industry is seven years ahead of the military technology-wise -- an eternity in a world where systems are upgraded continually.

In recent years, the Pentagon has worked at closing that gap by fielding commercial off-the-shelf equipment and then having the manufacturers tweak it to meet their needs.

For the experiment, which began Sept. 5 and ended Friday, more than 5,000 troops tested more than 40 concepts and technologies here, at Hurlburt Field, Fla., and Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., as well as other locations.

Though predominately an Air Force experiment to create the framework for theater air operations, emphasis was also placed on the different services working and learning together.

"The primary objective is to improve joint operational capability and reduce the risk of investment decisions," said Maj. Lewis E. Butler, deputy chief of logistics. "It will allow us to make informed purchases of equipment."

The price tag on that equipment could well be \$1 billion over time, Wetekam said.

This is the third large-scale "experiment" since 1998 aimed at selecting the systems that will guide not only the Air Force but the entire military for decades to come.

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